

Hand over Fist?

A response to Anthony Pym and Douglas Robinson

Michael Cronin

Dublin City University, Ireland

Debates are possible on the assumption that the participants are not slaves to positionality (class, race, gender) and that we are not simply repeating preordained institutional scripts. If that was the case then an on-line translation colloquium would be void of meaning. It would appear to me, however, that in two different but related ways, Anthony Pym and Douglas Robinson may in fact foreclose the very debate that they want us to begin. Anthony Pym borrowing Hobsbawm's concept of the «examination-passing classes» suggests that translation theoreticians' defence of the role of translation in the maintenance of national language is dictated by pure self-interest, «Who wouldn't want a national language? More work for us and our students!». There is of course in all institutional strategy an element of self-promotion (a point strangely ignored by some of the less self-reflexive post-modern theorists) but a reductive notion of self-interest is a rhetorical procedure whose only outcome is silence. To deny the charge of professional egotism is to be brought before the Higher Court of the Unconscious where the more serious charge of Repression is leveled against the accused (of course you deny you are motivated by professional self-interest, one of the tricks of hegemony is to pretend it does not exist). The self-interest

claim can only invite assent as any other response is evidence of incurable bad faith.

Douglas Robinson's notion of the translator as channel has the potential for inducing another form of paralysis, ideological overdeterminedness, that is reminiscent of the metanarratives of system and structure in the 60s and 70s which promised liberation and delivered powerlessness. «Readers, editors, users, teachers gave us feedback; channeling that feedback, we were channeling ideology. Our 'helpers' channeled it to us; we channel it to others». If the «ideosomatics of language is the voice of social mastery internalized in the workings of our own bodies» and ideology works at microcosmic, electrochemical levels then the translator becomes the idle plaything of ideology. She becomes invisible once again. Currents of ideology pass through this diaphanous creature who once again finds herself subject to the mastery of Language, Law and Ideology. The Foucauldian thesis that power is everywhere can often lead to the sorry conclusion that resistance is nowhere (if only because as any progressive critic of nationalism will tell you the powerless reproduce the paradigms of the powerful). Thus, ideological critique which initially is powered by a radical, demystificatory, anti-hegemonic impetus can give way to

the fatalism of the panopticon where post-Kantian subjects in a parody of Stephen Dedalus struggle aimlessly to free themselves of the nets of Knowledge, Power and Discourse.

Robinson is of course right to underline the translator's ideological entanglements (though it would have been useful to have a definition of ideology in the piece, when I last looked at theories of ideology I found fifteen different definitions of ideology), a fact borne out by even the most cursory examination of translation history. However, it appears to me that the erasure of the subject can in fact be a deeply reactionary move and lead to a depoliticisation of the translation process. The feminist political scientist Nancy Hartsock once noted that the postmodern view that truth and knowledge are contingent and multiple is in itself a truth claim and more importantly that the claim undermines the ontological status of the subject at the very time when women and non-Western peoples have begun to claim themselves as subject. This is why Pym in my view is correct to stress the intercultural/interlingual space of the translator as the position occupied by the translation subject. Studying translation from the point of view of the agent, to use Daniel Simeoni's term, allows for the possibility of a certain epistemic unity in translation studies rather than what Simeoni sees as the endless fragmentation of an object-centred, positivistic notion of translation as science (Daniel Simeoni, «Translating and Studying Translation: The View from the Agent», *META* 40/3, 445-460). The eternal *sourcier/cibliste* debates tend to render the translator invisible though feminist theories have repeatedly stressed the «positionality» of the translator. A study of the translator using some of the conceptual tools of intercultural theories of communication, psychoanalysis and ethnopsychiatry could indeed be quite illuminating for a theory of translator as intercultural

agent. The interlingual space that the translator occupies is indeed based on lingual separateness but the interlingual can only exist if there are lingual differences otherwise it would be a *non-sens*. Translation does not create differences, it merely makes them explicit. Rather than seeing translation as the enemy of the interlingual, one can argue the opposite, that it is by looking at the social, psychological, cultural and linguistic difficulties faced by the translator that one can map out the complexity of that intercultural space and draw on the millennial experience of translators rather than translations in seeking to overcome the problems of intercultural communication. A proper analysis of this experience could indeed provide a useful basis for the study of interlingual spaces that Pym recommends for translator training schools in Europe.

One of the problems of intercultural communication is of course asymmetry. Anthony Pym may argue in his *META* article that 'hegemony, conflict, exploitation' do not infiltrate everything but in institutional arrangements they infiltrate a great deal. More specifically in his theory of translation as a transaction cost, the notion of 'mutual benefits' remains somewhat nebulous. English speakers typically see little mutual benefit in translation because they speak a world language. Any effort invested in translation is seen as wasteful (viz. *Sunday Times* critique of EU literary translation schemes) and is only grudgingly granted. The mutual benefits to non-dominant languages are much greater but they typically have less political power and therefore are less able to insist on the necessary social effort being made to ensure a mutually beneficial interaction. Abandoning translation could, rather than opening up interlingual spaces, lead to unchecked positive feedback where the cumulative benefits of monoglossia for the linguistically dominant lead to the

emptying out of the interlingual space. That the 'mutual benefits' for Europe's weaker languages would approximate to zero would be irrelevant as linguistic interaction would be seen as primarily driven by monolingual pragmatism. This latter would be seen as the basis of successful cooperation not the mutual benefits to weaker parties. The symbolic (in the full not the shambolic sense) value of languages has a cost that is disproportionately high for the powerful and is disproportionately important for the powerless. Costs reflect this asymmetry and are a necessary element in the maintenance of diversity (language learning is of course another one). One could of course argue that the problem with the EU is not that it is spending too much money on translation but that it spends too much money on the wrong kind of translation. Pym's contention that for proper appreciation of works of literature in other languages, students should go to the countries where the literature is produced and immerse themselves in the language and culture that produced the literature is eminently sensible. However, it becomes eminently impractical once the student has the temerity to read

widely in the literatures of several countries given the inordinate amount of time it takes to get properly acquainted with a language and culture. For this reason, it is unfortunate that so much of the EU budget goes on administrative translation when the real, long-term needs of the citizens of the EU are in the area of literary and cultural translation, an area that is at present woefully underfunded. Are translators master forgers? Is the rise in translation activity to do with a new faith in fakes? Spiritual mediums were notoriously associated with fraud in the nineteenth century and it would be interesting to speculate on the link between translation and forgery in this context — the medium and the ego-massage. Douglas Robinson does not mention Michel Serres, yet his work on the angelic tasks of annunciation and communication in *La légende des anges* can be usefully related to Robinson's own concerns with guiding hands and spiritual channels, particularly Serre's concept of the fallen angels, the messengers who loom larger than the message (the stars of the mass media). Are cyborg translators the new seraphs or the mutinous vanguard of translators who would be God?